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ABSTRACT

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), created by the Communications Act of 1934, is an independent federal agency charged with regulating interstate and foreign communications by means of radio, television, wire, cable, and satellite. This bulletin briefly describes its objectives, activities, functions, organizational structure, the regulation of various means of communication and licensing; and the Commission's role in international communications, safety protection, and national defense. (SC)

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The FCC in Brief

Federal Communications Commission, Washington D.C.

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INFORMATION BULLETIN

THE FCC IN BRIEF

WHAT IS THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION?

It is the United States Government agency charged with regulating interstate and foreign communication by means of radio, television, wire, cable, and satellite.

WHAT IS THE OBJECT OF FCC REGULATION?

To provide for orderly development and operation of radio* services, to make available a rapid, efficient, nationwide and worldwide telegraph and telephone service at reasonable charges; to promote the safety of life and property through the use of wire and radio communication; and to employ communication facilities in the national defense.

IS THE FCC UNDER ANY GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT?

No. It is an independent Federal agency created by Congress and, as such, reports directly to Congress.

HOW DID THE FCC COME INTO BEING?

Jurisdiction over wire and radio communications at various times was handled by the Department of Commerce, Post Office Department, Interstate Commerce Commission and the Federal Radio Commission. Technological developments and interference necessitated coordination of these regulatory functions in a single agency. The Communications Act, signed June 19, 1934, created the Federal Communications Commission for that purpose.

*Radio is used here in an all-inclusive sense and refers to television as well as other broadcasting and nonbroadcasting uses.

IS THE COMMUNICATIONS ACT LIMITED TO THE 50 STATES?

No. It applies also to Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, but not to the Canal Zone.

WHAT ARE THE FCC'S MAJOR ACTIVITIES?

It allocates bands of frequencies to non-Government communications services and assigns frequencies to individual stations; licenses and regulates stations and operators; regulates common carriers in interstate and foreign communication by telegraph, telephone, and satellite; promotes safety through the use of radio on land, water, and in the air; encourages more effective and widespread use of radio; utilizes wire and radio communication services in national defense. It does not regulate radio operations by the Federal Government.

HOW IS THE FCC ADMINISTERED?

The FCC consists of seven Commissioners appointed by the President with the approval of the Senate. No Commissioner can have a financial interest in any Commission-regulated business. No more than four Commissioners may be members of the same political party. Appointments are for seven years, except in filling an unexpired term. The salary of a Commissioner is $39,900 a year; the Chairman receives $42,000. One of the Commissioners is designated Chairman by the President. The Chairman's tenure during his term of office is at the pleasure of the President.

HOW DOES THE FCC FUNCTION?

The Commissioners function as a unit, supervising all FCC activities, with delegations of responsibilities to boards and Committees of Commissioners, individual Commissioners, and staff units. The Chairman is responsible for the general administration of the internal affairs of the Commission.

Policy determinations are made by the Commission as a whole. Commission practices conform to the Communications Act of 1934, as amended, the Administrative Procedure Act, and other applicable laws.

The FCC staff is organized on a functional basis. There are five operating bureaus--Broadcast, Cable Television, Common Carrier, Field Operations, and Safety and Special Radio Services-- and six staff offices--Executive Director, General Counsel, Chief Engineer, Opinions and Review, Administrative Law Judges, and the Review Board.

WHAT DOES THE FCC FIELD STAFF DO?

It is engaged largely in engineering work. This includes monitoring the radio spectrum to see that station operation meets technical requirements, inspecting stations of all types, conducting operator examinations and issuing permits or licenses to those found qualified, locating and closing unauthorized transmitters, furnishing radio bearings for aircraft or ships in distress, locating sources of interference and suggesting remedial measures, doing special engineering work for other Government agencies, and obtaining and analyzing technical data for Commission use.

HOW DOES THE FCC COOPERATE WITH OTHER AGENCIES?

In international and national matters, it works with various Government agencies involved with radio and wire communication. It also cooperates with state regulatory commissions in telephone and telegraph matters of mutual concern, largely through the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners. It also cooperates with radio-user groups.

HOW MANY PERSONS DOES THE FCC EMPLOY?

About 2,100 regular employees, of whom more than one-fourth are engaged in field engineering. With few exceptions, FCC personnel is under Civil Service.

WHAT DOES FCC REGULATION OF RADIO INCLUDE?

This involves consideration of applications for construction permits and licenses for all classes of non-Government stations; assignment of frequencies, power, and call signs; authorization of communication circuits; modification and renewal of licenses; inspection of transmitting equipment and regulation of its use; control of interference; review of technical operation; licensing of radio operators (commercial and amateur); remedial action when necessary, and other implementation of the Communications Act. The Commission does not license sets used for reception only.

HOW ARE BROADCAST STATIONS REGULATED?

This FCC function includes allocation of spectrum space for AM and FM radio and VHF and UHF television broadcast services; assignment of frequencies and call letters to stations; designation of operating power and sign-on and sign-off times. The Commission also issues construction permits and inspects technical equipment.

While the FCC is prohibited by law from censoring program content, it does have many regulatory responsibilities in the program area. For example, it requires licensees to attempt to ascertain amd serve the programming tastes, needs, and desires of their communities. Licensees are also obligated to comply with statutes, rules, and policies relating to program content, such as identification of all sponsored broadcast matter, broadcasting information only on state-operated lotteries in their own or adjacent states.

The FCC also requires licensees to make available equal opportunities for use of broadcast facilities by political candidates. It also enforces rules on personal attacks, editorials endorsing or opposing political candidates, station identification, identification of recorded programs or program segments, and publicly declared Commission policies on fairness in the presentation of controversial issues. The FCC requires licensees to prevent use of their facilities for false or misleading advertising.

The Commission conducts inquiries and investigations. Licensees who have violated FCC statutes, rules, or policies are subject to sanctions including loss of license and fines up to $10,000.

The Commission limits the number of broadcasting outlets that any one individual or company may own to a total of seven AM, seven FM and seven TV stations (only five of which can be VHF). The same owner cannot operate more than one station of the same kind in the same place.

Since broadcasting stations are not common carriers, the Commission does not regulate rates profits, accounting methods, or other financial aspects of station operations.

HOW ARE COMMON CARRIERS REGULATED?

In addition to licensing radiotelephone circuits and assigning frequencies for their operation, the FCC supervises charges, practices, classifications, and regulations in interstate and foreign communication by radio, wire and cable; considers applications for construction of new facilities and discontinuance or reduction of service; acts on applications for interlocking directorates and mergers, and prescribes and reviews the accounting practices of communication carriers.

The Commission does not regulate purely intrastate wire services; they are under the jurisdiction of their respective state utility commissions.

CAN ALIENS HOLD RADIO LICENSES?

The radio license privilege is limited essentially to citizens of the Unites States. It is generally denied to aliens or their respresentatives, foreign governments or their representatives, foreign coporations, and domestic corporations with alien officers, directors or more than one-fifth of their capital stock owned or voted by alien interest.

In the interest of air safety, certain noncitizen aircraft pilots holding United States pilot certificates who must use radio in their piloting duties may hold licenses. Under reciprocal agreements with a number of other nations, alien radio amateurs may be authorized to operate their stations while visiting the United States. Aliens who have immigrated to the United States and declared their intentions to become U. S. citizens may be issued amateur station and operator licenses.

A radio station license may also be held by an alien in the case of vessels and aircraft required by an act of Congress or by treaty to carry radio. Commerical radio operator licenses and permits generally are granted only to United States citizens.

WHAT ARE SOME TYPES OF BROADCAST SERVICES?

The list includes the older standard or AM (amplitude modulation); FM (frequency modulation), commercial and noncommercial educational, including stereophonic; TV (television), commercial and noncommercial educational, also Pay-TV; international (except stations operated by the Government); supplemental services such as FM functional music, TV translators, remote pickup and studio-transmitter link; and experimental and developmental services.

The Commission does not license cable TV (community antenna) or closed circuit (wired) TV systems since they do not transmit over the air. It does, however, regulate cable through issuance of certificates of compliance to systems that have received franchises from their local governing body. It also regulates TV importation of signals from other TV markets.

WHAT ARE SOME OTHER RADIO SERVICES?

These include Aviation (aircraft and ground); Marine (ship and coastal); Public Safety (police, fire, forestry conservation, highway maintenance, local government, special emergency, and state guard); Industrial (business, forest products, manufacturers, motion picture, petroleum, power, relay press, special industrial, and telephone maintenance); Land Transportation (railroad, passenger and truck, taxicab, and automobile emergency); Amateur, Citizens, Disaster and Experimental; also Common Carrier (paging, land mobile, microwave relay, broadcast relay, and international radiotelephone and radiotelegraph services).

HOW ARE STATION CALL SIGNALS ASSIGNED?

International agreement provides for national identification of a station by the first letter or first two letters of its call signal, and for this purpose apportions the alphabet among the nations. The United States uses the initial letters K, N, and W exclusively and part of the A series. Call signals are assigned by the Commission on an individual basis.

The initial letter N is reserved for the Navy and Coast Guard, while A, K, and W are shared by other Government and non-Government stations. Broadcast station calls begin with K or W. Calls prefixed by K identify stations located west of the Mississippi River, while W is used east of the river, except for some long established stations whose call letters were allocated before the assignment rule was adopted.

WHAT IS THE FCC ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL MATTERS?

It is charged with domestic administration of telecommunication provisions of treaties and international agreements to which the United States is a party. Under Department of State auspices, it participates in related international conferences. It licenses radio and cable circuits from the United States to foreign points and regulates the operating companies.

It also licenses radio stations on American planes and ships in international service, and, under international agreements and upon request, inspects the radio equipment of foreign vessels touching our ports. Further, it is the medium for resolving cases of interference between domestic and foreign radio stations.

WHAT ABOUT SAFETY OF LIFE AND PROPERTY?

The Communications Act stipulates: "For the purpose of obtaining maximum effectiveness from the use of radio and wire communications in connection with safety of life and property, the Commission shall investigate and study all phases of the problem and the best methods of obtaining the cooperation and coordination of these systems." Radio installations on vessels and aircraft, also police, fire, forestry and other protective radio systems are in this category.

HOW DOES RADIO AID BUSINESS?

Besides affording a speedy means of communication and being a factor in protecting life and property, radio contributes to economies and improvements in public and private business operations. It has become an important adjunct to rail, highway, water and air transportation, to public utility, industrial and other business operations.

DOES THE FCC ENGAGE IN STUDIES AND RESEARCH?

The Commission is required to "study new uses for radio, provide for experimental uses of frequencies, and generally encourage the larger and more effective use of radio in the public interest." Cooperation is maintained with Government and commercial research and development groups. In connection with its research activities, the FCC operates a laboratory at Laurel, Maryland. It also carries out policy studies to provide information on complex questions facing the Commission.

WHAT IS THE FCC'S ROLE IN NATIONAL DEFENSE?

Wire and radio communication facilities used to aid the national defense form one of the basic requirements of the Communication Act. The President has delegated certain of these functions to the FCC. Among other things, the Commission supervises the Emergency Broadcast System to notify and instruct the public in the event of enemy attack. This system is put to peacetime use for broadcasting information and instructions about local and statewide emergencies. The FCC cooperates with Federal, State, and local authorities in the preparation of emergency plans and, in turn, has the cooperation of public and industry elements concerned.

DOES THE FCC CHARGE FOR ITS SERVICES?

The Commission charges fees for the filing of applications in most of its licensing activities, and the income goes into the United States Treasury.

WHERE CAN ONE GET MORE REFERENCE MATERIAL?

Those interested in more detail about the Commission may purchase various FCC printed publications from the Government Printing Office or obtain free single copies of information bulletins from the FCC. Lists will be furnished on request to the Public Information Office, Federal Communications Commission, Washington, D. C. 20554

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